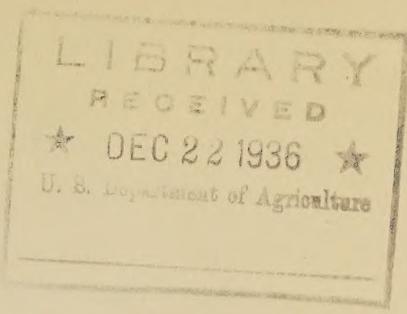


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FARM LIFE INFLUENCE IN THE NEW AMERICAN ART

BY

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Reprinted from
Agricultural Library Notes (U. S. Department of Agriculture Library)
April 1936, vol. 11, no. 4, p. 221-224

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FARM LIFE INFLUENCE IN THE NEW AMERICAN ART

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It is of great interest to all agricultural workers that since those phases of our arts that are related to painting began to develop a distinctive school, which has come to be known as the New American Art, the agricultural influence has been decidedly dominant. Of the five painters whom Thomas Craven names as the leaders of this new movement, four are of farm origin and have returned to their rural States for their subjects and to do their work. Each had had foreign study and foreign travel, and each had done successful work more or less in foreign ways. This return has been a deliberate choice on their part and has been followed by an enthusiasm of work and a vitalizing of method and results that have bid fair to awaken a notoriously inartistic Nation into a genuine understanding and appreciation of the art that is being created within its borders.

Of these five leaders - Charles Burchfield of Ohio, Thomas Benton of Missouri, Grant Wood of Iowa, John Stewart Curry of Kansas, and Reginald Marsh of New York - Marsh is the only one who works with city subjects. He likes to do the common people as found on subways and city streets, at popular resorts, and in breadlines. He has recently turned to murals and is executing one for the new Federal Post Office Building in Washington.

The four rural painters have varying characteristics. Burchfield is credited with having started the revolt against foreign domination and the return trek to the rural regions on the part of potent workers in the arts. Essentially a Middlewesterner, he has wandered over all America visiting the open country, the settlements, and the farms, painting American life in the raw and in the making. He is more brilliant than powerful, says Thomas Craven, but "on the strength of things accomplished he must be called one of our best artists".

Benton, a more accomplished technician than Burchfield, according to Craven, is our most prominent, vigorous, and versatile painter. It was Burchfield who turned him from his rather imitative art life and work in Europe to the possibilities at home. He too has now travelled, chiefly on foot, from the large industrial cities to the far-lying crannies of America, collecting materials for the painting that has now made him "the most widely discussed artist in America". His versatility is notable. As he studied with Orozco before the Mexican murals had such profound effect on American work, he was among our first to paint in the terms of vital social problems. His mural in the New School for Social Research in New York is probably his best known but the painting of several wall and ceiling panels in the Whitney Museum of New York is a close second, and Craven calls his History of Indiana the most impressive wall decoration on the American continent.

John Stewart Curry is probably the most emotional of the new school - some say the most poetic, having in mind the virile verse of the day. There is frequently a hint of fanaticism in his work as in his Baptism in Kansas which is taking place in a Kansas farmyard. He reflects the striking con-

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trasts of the Midwest weather, the jungle law as still applied in animal life, the emotionalism of primitive religion. Curry is to execute one of the murals in the Department of Justice Building - the movement of population westward, and the freeing of the slaves.

We come now to Grant Wood, "who, with Benton, now occupies the most influential position in American art". Only within the last two or three years has he shot into his position of national acclaim. "As if by a flash of revelation" says Craven, "Wood made his dynamic change and rapidly developed from just another painter of pictures into the designer of original forms which have no parallel in modern art". Undoubtedly with the laymen he is the general favorite among this group. He seized attention with his "American Gothic" in which the stalwart Midwest farmer and his wife stand only slightly stylized against the distant outline of the gable of the barn in such a way that the Gothic window is definitely suggested - "incomparable characterization rendered with a craftsmanship of the highest order", according to one of the leading critics. His three-part "Dinner for Threshers" is fully as revealing and satisfying - true to realities yet with overtones that suggest the great art of all centuries. We readers of this magazine know with pleasure that the huge two-story panels that hung so effectively at the head of the great staircase of the Corcoran Art Gallery last winter as a part of the national exhibit of the Public Works of Art Project are to form the mural for the Library of the State College of Iowa. In the upper part of the panels is the fragrant haymow and in the lower part are the animals that are to be fed from it. That Wood was primarily a craftsman is always evident in his designs, giving them a sense of permanency that seems to contradict those who view him as a fad and seems to confirm those who believe that he is here to stay - "a powerful factor in our declaration of independence in art".

For of course all is not fair weather for these crusaders - and pioneers. Along with the plaudits of those who wanted reality rather than artificiality or abstractions, yet wanted the reality infused with the true artist touch and power, come the inevitable protests of the irreconcilables against the breaking away from the old traditions, and the warnings of the lukewarm against too early and too enthusiastic acceptance.

But even they realize that Grant Wood has started a regionalism in this group of the arts such as has had notable success in other fields. We hear now of the Minnesota group, the Iowa group - and farm themes are frequent among them all. In many instances the artists have not returned to their native States, as Wanda Gag and Lucile Blanch who are living in the East, but their work bears the unmistakable stamp of long familiarity with the rural themes they use.

The essential Americanism of this new school has been everywhere recognized but it has remained for Grant Wood to emphasize the rural influence in contemporary American art. In his article on the subject in the February 1936 number of *Rural America* which minimises his own part in the movement, he reminds us that rural scenes, characters, and events have emerged to a dominant position in our arts and that a great part of the creative work that is being done today is flavored with a close relationship to the soil.

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He goes much further than this: he declares that from the stand-points of providing material for the creation of works of art, of producing competent artists to create them, and of furnishing intelligent audiences to appreciate them, rural America occupies a more prominent position today than at any previous time in our history.

Here he reaches a crux of the whole question of American art, for the newer psychology would certainly teach us that rather general participation and appreciation are vital factors in any national art life. To collect rich treasures from abroad even for public display here, or to produce a few notable artists ourselves, will not do as much toward helping America to take a satisfactory place in the art life of the Nations as will the more general diffusion of the actual original work of design, and of painting, and of sculpture, and of etching, and the awakening and the exercise of a vivid appreciation of such work among our people generally, and the development of a vigorous and original critical and appraising art sense among Americans who are specializing in studying, teaching, writing, collecting, and dealing in art subjects.

We of the Department of Agriculture remember with pride that it was Dr. Charles J. Galpin, dean of rural sociologists, who challenged the assembled representatives of the creative arts at a meeting of the American Federation of Arts thirteen years ago, to seek out and use the vital phases of American agriculture that everywhere surrounded them. It was a new voice with a new call among them. The story of how his address happened to be given is told in the South Atlantic Quarterly for July 1928 under the somewhat foreign title of Farm Life in Fiction. The Public Works of Art Project was later a great impetus to this new movement as a whole. The prescribed subject was the American scene. The results were hung within the regions where produced and these exhibitions were visited by thousands who had never attended as large showings before. Some of the best work was brought to Washington for a national exhibit and was sent to other large centers later. Many of us will long remember "Vendue", that small painting of a forced sale of a farm by a painter unknown to us, surrounded by paintings much larger and more striking. The canvas was so small that the expressions on the faces could scarcely be seen, but through the groupings and the attitudes of the farmer figures the picture was instinct with silent watchfulness and hopeless fear. When the canvas reached the Museum of Modern Art in New York its Director thought this picture by Robert Tabor of Independence, Iowa, one of the best done under the entire project.

The success of the Stone City Art School and Colony conducted in the depths of Iowa for two years, with Grant Wood as one of the leaders, is a significant indication of what can be accomplished among rural people. One of the first of such ventures in the Middle West, it soon found that the abandoned stone buildings could not hold all who wished to work there. Then the Sunday visitors from village and farm, near and far, were so many that a small visitor's fee was charged on that day. So great was the attendance that these fees made it possible for the venture to pay expenses. These rural visitors sometimes staid for lessons and many bought pictures. It is authoritatively stated that 400 of Grant Wood's paintings have been brought direct, not through any dealer, by dwellers in Iowa.

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Patronage is necessary to the permanence of any art. An art patronage that is rooted in the rural regions is a new thing in America and is perhaps one of the best indications for the future of this school of painting. Although conceding that no one knows how permanent the present ascendancy of rural life in American art will be, Grant Wood himself believes that the present enthusiasm for the arts in America will prove to be broader, more profound, and more lasting than any similar interest in our history.

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